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Comparing and reconceptualising the (populist) radical right

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Symposium Introduction

Comparing and Reconceptualising the (Populist) Radical Right

(Note: [authors] = names of contributing authors)

The days when one could identify certain non-mainstream parties by their mix of biological racism and ethnic understandings of belonging now seem a thing of the past. On-going attempts to *mainstream* their electoral appeal (Minkenberg, 2013) have not only impacted on coalition dynamics, on the 'health' of democracy, and on party – electorate linkages (see e.g. De Lange, 2012, Canovan, 1999). They also have implications for how we conceptualise and understand those parties typically classified as extreme, radical, or one-issue (see e.g. Ennser, 2010, Ignazi, 2003). If viewed comparatively, then a particular set of challenges tend to emerge. Conventional classifications often consider the anti-immigration stance to be an important – if not crucial - feature of these parties (see e.g. Wagner, 2011, Adams *et al,* 2006). . Yet authoritarianism, nationalism, populism, and welfare-state/labour market chauvinism are increasingly invoked to characterise this disparate party family (see e.g., Wagner and Meyer, 2017, Rydgren, 2007; Mudde, 2004). These intra-family differences thus raise important questions. First, what do those various tags scholars have used mean today? Mudde (2004), for example, refers to the 'populist radical right' (PRR), whereas Rydgren (2005) labels these parties 'extreme right-wing populist'. Lucassen and Lubbers (2012), Meguid (2005), and Norris (2005), on the other hand, call them 'far-right', 'niche' and 'radical right' parties. However, several challengers that currently demand a more involved role for the state often started out wanting the exact opposite. The status quo was criticised for having an excessive control over the economy and for its high levels of taxation (Taggart, 2002). Any significant opposition to immigration - or any equally strong nationalist sentiments – tended to play minor

roles on their electoral agendas and for their party identities. Yet some of these fringe parties have also championed free-market ideals, which were often coupled with draconian approaches to border control and to integration. The Norwegian Progress Party, for example, fits very well in with the former category, whereas the United Kingdom Independence Party corresponds better to the latter. The immigration 'issue' has thus constituted a core part of the identity for *some* of these parties, whereas for others, it became important at a much later stage. Yet this diverse set of parties are typically grouped together under the same umbrella, albeit with different labels (see e.g. Camia and Caramani, 2012; Ensser, 2012; Zaslove, 2009). This spread suggests that the extreme; niche; PRR; and radical right-tags could be challenging to use as analytical tools. Their broad-church definitions are partly responsible for the concept stretching that has occurred over time. These labels are often attached to parties where the neo-Nazi ideology has (partially) been rooted out, yet are simultaneously applied to parties where such a belief system is very much alive. And the terms frequently incorporate parties with quite different views on state-market relations (see e.g. contributions in Akkerman *et al,* 2016).

It is therefore worth reflecting on how past - and recent - political developments affect those qualifiers that determine membership to this (loosely grouped) 'family'. Is it perhaps time to move beyond traditional definitions which emphasise nativism, xenophobia, and a reduction in numbers-type rhetoric when categorising parties as either 'populist', 'radical' and/or 'rightist'? This is a particularly relevant question to ask given the blurred boundaries between 'mainstream' and 'non-mainstream' parties. A quick glance across (Western) Europe returns several cases of a traditionally defined mainstream seeking to tighten border controls and move away from multicultural-type policies. This so-called 'return of assimilation' (see contributions to Joppke and Marawska, 2003) arguably raises questions about conceptualisation and definition. But it also challenges conventional cut-off points for when parties can (and should) be labelled as 'mainstream' rather than 'extreme'; 'PRR' or 'radical'. For example, are their

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views on taxation, labour market arrangements, and welfare state policies any different from those expressed by the political mainstream? And should these views diverge, then have they remained static or evolved in any particular direction over time? Moreover, does it make sense to label parties as 'radical' or being on the 'right' should their positions on, say, welfare state management not fundamentally differ from those of social democratic-type parties? Indeed, these are questions that [authors] address in their contribution. By invoking the Manifesto Project Dataset, they consider positional changes that niche parties have made since 1970. The authors pay special attention to economic *and* socio-cultural questions, thus bringing the multi-dimensionality of these parties to the fore. [Authors] key finding – party ideology is not consistent in comparative perspective - suggests a degree of variation *between* those parties typically placed in the PRR, radical, or extreme right categories. In fact, [authors] identify so much diversity that they question the accuracy of locating these parties on the economic *and* socio-cultural right. What could be more helpful, they conclude, is to describe the contemporary radical right as *neo-nationalist*. That is, the unifying factor is not necessarily a shared platform on economic issues - or even on state-individual relationships. The commonality is instead how they subscribe to a subset of nationalist thinking, namely, the neo-nationalist one. To maintain – rather than to make – boundaries is therefore a particularly relevant feature of these parties. [Authors] pursue a similar logic. Although nativism and defending sovereignty are still important, what appears to be gaining traction is how latent – sometimes explicit – Eurosceptic positions can be exploited. If the niche contender manages to capitalize on voters' anti-EU sentiments then it may well yield even greater electoral feats than what currently is the case. And particularly so, the authors argue, should Euroscepticism be a key feature of their electoral mobilization strategies. [Authors] thus shift analytical attention elsewhere when they suggest that the main 'threat' is not necessarily the migrant 'other' but rather the supra-national one. However, if mainstream parties manage to pacify growing levels

of Euroscepticism, then it may inadvertently lead to (even) greater results for the radical contender since they often have a comparatively stronger reputation on the EU 'issue'.

A second question we pose relates to the electoral successes of non-mainstream challengers. Conventional wisdom suggests a fairly strong link between levels of unemployment and niche contenders increasing their share of the vote. But such a conclusion may mask other, equally important, factors. For example, it risks overlooking the role played by prevailing institutions, particularly those that govern labour markets and unemployment benefits. Institutional stability and institutional performance are arguably just as important to consider as the state of the economy is. [Authors'] starting point is that economic insecurity, caused by unemployment, is likely to affect different groups on the labour market in different ways. This is especially the case for so-called labour market 'insiders' - i.e. the ones in permanent employment - versus the 'outsiders' – i.e. the unemployed. For the former group, the fear of being laid off increases as unemployment levels go up. But for the latter, lacking an income increases real – as well as perceived – levels of insecurity. Unemployment, then, is likely to exacerbate economic insecurity, which, in turn, drives support for non-mainstream parties. But as [authors] note, we should also consider any mediating effects certain labour market policies have on the unemployed. Such a structural focus helps us understand variation between cases that have growing levels of unemployment but no obvious growth in support for anti-immigration parties. The authors' findings suggest that unemployment levels may on their own not be enough to explain differences in electoral fortunes. But if redundancy is combined with low levels of unemployment *benefits* then the above factors start to matter. Employment protection will thus have a mediating effect on insecurity - and on the support for niche contenders - but *only* when the share of foreigners is low. And, finally, [authors] provide an over-time comparative case-study of the relatively late entry Sweden constitutes with regards to having an electorally successful radical right-wing party. Their submission highlights the

transformation of the political space – from uni- to multi-dimensional – as an important factor for understanding why Swedish politics was so late in falling in line with developments observed elsewhere in Europe. Their article analyses important changes over the past fifteen years, of which the most significant ones are the partial de-politicization of the economic, left-right dimension, and a corresponding politicization of issues along the socio-cultural dimension. As long as economic politics dominated, Sweden was shielded against mobilizing attempts of radical right-wing parties, and as long as class identities were also strong, and class voting common, working class voters were not easily swayed away from the Social Democrats. But in combination with a growing convergence of mainstream party positions, these changes opened up a space for niche contenders to exploit and become (increasingly) successful. [Authors]'s article thus emphasizes the importance of vertical comparisons – that is, relatively detailed and over-time within the confinement of one or a few countries – as a complement to horizontal comparisons, that is, less detailed and across a larger amount of cases.

This symposium has been an attempt to reflect on how we conceptualise and define the extreme, niche, PRR and radical right categories. An important finding is that a shift appears underway in contemporary European politics. Several niche contenders are now increasingly difficult to distinguish from their mainstream equivalents. This is especially the case should distinctions be made solely on party stances on the immigration 'issue. A large chunk of the European mainstream is currently moving in the same direction as their more radical counterparts, and has - to varying degrees – also adopted similar approaches to immigration and integration (but not necessarily using the same rhetoric). Yet several fringe parties have also gone through important changes. The 'new' direction they face suggests a greater role played by the state. A key change identified by [authors] is their - almost anachronistic - move towards the economic centre-left. But several non-mainstream parties have also redefined their

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positions on socio-cultural issues, especially those relating to nationalism. This begs the question - is it a misnomer to refer to extreme or radical right-wing parties as being on the 'right' should some of their positions have more in common with the centre-left? Previous research often suggests that scholars should appreciate party system multidimensionality [Authors] as well as [authors] contributions further underscore this point. Placing mainstream – as well as non-mainstream – parties in such a space provides greater nuance, and potentially furthers our understanding of how party competition has changed. Scholars may equally want to revisit the assumptions made regarding the (seemingly) unstoppable momentum extreme or radical right-wing parties experience at the moment. The contributions to this symposium thus high-light several avenues for future research to pursue. [Authors] open up possibilities to further probe the interplay between mainstream and non-mainstream views on the EU. This relationship could thus be important to take into account when explaining electoral successes of the latter. .Yet we should not lose sight of the context parties compete and function in. [Authors], as well as [Authors], emphasise the roles played by particular institutional configurations (labour market policies for the former, and politicization of cleavages for the latter). These institutional approaches can help explain variation between cases but they also tap into long-standing debates about structure and agency. Do parties take institutions into account when they compete for votes? Or are they largely at the mercy of these forces with limited possibilities to exercise any form of agency? The authors' findings suggest that the latter may well be the case but also point to a need for further (comparative) studies to be made.

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